

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost: John 6:1-21

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I have eaten many strange things in my days. For the more squeamish among you, I'll spare you the grosser side of the spectrum, but I've had my fair share of weird foods. I've had grasshopper *en vivant*, mountain oysters, and a fish dish that would make your eyes pop. But all of those dishes came with an unspoken promise: try it just this once, and if you don't like it, no worries. No one's gonna force you to keep eating something you don't like. Of course if you want more, unlikely though that may be, there's always leftovers. Now, I tend to like leftovers. There's something special about the way a dish sorta matures after a day or two in the fridge. All the flavors get to know each other and the end result is, in some ways, an improvement over the original. Soups and stews and slaws are especially good about this. But even I come to a point where leftovers get tiresome. After Thanksgiving, say, when you cooked a bird that could serve 50 but only 5 showed up, just how many different ways can you come up with to serve turkey before the idea of turkey makes you bored?

One year for Christmas, someone gave my sister a ham, a 20-pound ham. Now, this was, of course, a very generous gift from some fancy mail-order gourmet supplier, and when she got it she was giddy with ham-infused excitement. She loved ham, and this was the biggest ham she'd ever seen. But once she broke into that ham, she got worried that it might go bad if she didn't work her way through it fairly quickly. So, every meal, she came up with some excuse to use it. Fried ham at breakfast, ham sandwich at lunch, sliced ham for dinner. She made ham and beans, ham sliders, ham shepherd's pie, ham mac and cheese, ham omelets, homemade ham hot pockets, ham on white, ham on wheat, ham on rye, ham on hand. Ham ham ham. As you can imagine, it didn't take long for my sister to grow tired of ham. Now, I fully realize this was a first-world problem of cuisine, but a weird thing happened as she worked through that 20 pounds of meat. By the time she got to the end of it, she couldn't even bring herself to make stock out of the picked-clean shank. This is really saying something because we are a waste-nothing family of eaters. So for her to toss that bone without pulling one last meal out of it was a real sign of the trouble to come. And then the unthinkable happened. My sister proclaimed that she would never eat ham again.

Now, I'm sure many of us have said something like that before. And then a month or two later, someone presents us with a ham steak and red eye gravy, and all bets are off. But not my sister. She ate a lifetime's worth of ham in one stretch and was done. She swore off ham. It's been more than 15 years since she removed ham from her life, and to this day, if you ask her if she'd like some ham, she gets this look on her face somewhere between disdain, anger, and nausea. As the younger brother, you better believe I use this knowledge to my advantage every chance I get. But it actually fascinates me. Too much of a very good thing spoiled her appetite.

Now, I still love leftovers, but I wonder about the psychology of what's leftover. There's gotta be some kind of fondness tied to leftovers beyond just the sustenance they provide. Maybe there's a reminder of hours spent in the kitchen as a family prepping the original meal together? Or maybe there's a call-back to the satisfaction you felt when you saw everyone else enjoy that first bite when it was fresh? Maybe there's something sort of fun, like going to a buffet in your own home when there's only one serving left of several different meals so you open up all the tupperware and fill every corner of counter space with a hodgepodge of flavors leftover from a bunch of different meals. Who doesn't love leftover fried chicken with leftover spaghetti and a side of leftover green beans? Or maybe there's something evolutionary going on? Like, as long as there's leftovers, I know I can survive another day? But then there's the other side, my sister's side with all that ham, where something she once loved turns into something she despises. Too much all at once. I wonder about this, about what it means to have too much of something you love. Because it seems like that shouldn't be a thing, right? We all know the saying "absence makes the heart grow fonder," but wouldn't you rather be around the thing you love? Leftovers remind us of the thing we loved, and to a point, when you get to the bottom of the

tupperware, there's a little sadness, like, "well, shoot, that's the end of the curry rice." But of course sometimes there's a relief, like, "thank God we finally worked our way through that over-salted salad dressing."

I guess what I'm most interested in, though, is how just the right amount of leftovers breeds a sort of fondness for the next time that thing comes around. When I lived in Newport, Arkansas, there was a lady there who had a stunningly good recipe for rum cake. Her big not-so-secret was that you take all the liquids in the recipe and replace them with rum. Yowza. She'd drop one off at the rectory from time to time, and Becca and I worked our way through, making sure never to operate heavy machinery after a good slice. And as we approached the end of it, our slices would get smaller and smaller, trying to stretch out that delicious cake as long as we could. And the last slice we'd split, savoring each remaining nibble, knowing it'd be a while before the next cake would appear on our porch. That final bite was a reminder that we'd really encountered something special and we just might get to taste it again, and that day couldn't come soon enough.

I think it's because of all this that I've always loved the ending of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. There's this astounding miracle where Jesus serves a massive crowd with only the things a boy can carry, and all eat their fill. That's great. It reminds me of holiday dinners at grandma's house, but, like, holy. But it's the ending that I really love. The moment where everyone's putting on their coats and getting ready to leave and grandma wraps up a little of everything in foil and sends 'em out into the world with a kiss on the cheek and an arm-full of food and love.

Jesus has his disciples gather up what's left, and they fill twelve entire baskets where only a few loaves had been before. The story doesn't say what they did with all those leftovers, but I like to imagine Jesus sent all those folks home with 'em. It's no accident, after all, that there's twelve whole baskets of leftovers. That's one basket for each of the tribes of Israel, enough to feed a nation, enough to start there and feed the world. Sent out with an armful of food and love.

And I gotta think that, while these baskets full of barley loaves and fish were enough to feed everyone, that there was still just enough to fill you up and leave you longing for the next time that bread came into your life. Maybe even the first time you'd really felt full and also the last time you'd ever look at bread the same way again. And those who shared the leftovers had more than a story of cooking in the kitchen to share. They'd share the word of this miracle and the man who made it happen, too, and maybe that made the leftovers even sweeter still, marinated in the word of God. And as much as there was leftover, enough to feed the world, I can't imagine anyone on that mountain or anyone that ate from its stores, I can't imagine anyone falling into the same place as my sister and her overly generous Christmas ham. This wasn't a meal of obligation or stubbornness or a race against time. This bread was a gift, a rare gift, a gift with a built-in longing for more of the same. Leftovers you'd never want to see the end of, and a God who spread the table where you could find them.

When we gather here and join together in this meal at this table, this story is part of what we remember. The words we say are from the Last Supper, of course, but there's so much here, too. We give thanks, we break bread, we give to all who desire to eat with us. And we leave a little leftover every time, a little that goes into the world to feed those who couldn't be here, a little that we take with us, a little leftover Christ to feed the world. And God knows, we long for more when we've fasted from it. We've all felt that over the past 18 months. These are our leftovers: our scriptures, our liturgies, our theologies, and our bread. Leftovers passed down from one table to another across the millennia. They sustain us, they feed us, they leave us wanting more the next time and longing for the next time to come around a little sooner. These are our leftovers. And with them, we are fed and, in turn, we feed the world.